ISLAM AND THE WEST

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Publisher's Note

This paper was read in the seminar held in the Oxford University on 22nd July, 1983, to discuss 'Islam and the West.' The seminar, presided over by Dr. D. G. Browning, of St. Cross College, Oxford, was attended by a considerable number of professors, scholars and students of Islamics, besides several scholars from Pakistan and certain Arab Countries, who had been invited to express their views on the subject. As the seminar was convened to consider the establishment of an Islamic Centre at Oxford, this paper seeks to bring out the need and importance of such an institution in that educational centre of U. K.

Dr. Browning asked the Maulana, before the paper was read, to speak in Arabic for the benefit of Arab scholars and diplomats occupying the front seats. Addressing the gathering in Arabic, the Maulana said, "It is a pleasure for me to address this august gathering in Arabic which is the literary as well as international Language of Islam. It is the language through which the intellectual heritage of the classical world reached this country via Spain. It consisted of Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics and Medicine. The greatest gift of the Arab world and Spain to the West

was Inductive Logic which replaced Deductive Logic and altogether changed its way of thought. It won over the West to the methods of inquiry and experimentation and gave birth to science and technology preparing its way to progress.

"There was a time when the colonial rulers and scholars of the West who came to our eastern and Muslim countries used to address us in English. Today I am obliged to speak here in Arabic. This is the way the world changes. *Such are the haps that We change about among mankind.*" *(3 : 140)*

M. RABEY NADWI
Secretary, Academy of Islamic
Research & Publications

ISLAM AND THE WEST

Dear Firends,

First of all, let me express my earnest gratitude to you for inviting me to this meeting which has been organised to discuss such a thought-provoking subject as "ISLAM AND THE WEST" at this great Oxford University known and respected all over the world as a premier seat of higher education.

I am especially grateful to Dr. D. G. Browning and his colleagues who have afforded me an opportunity to address this distinguished gathering and to meet a number of scholars and students of Islam.

Britain was the first country of the West to come in contact with the Islamic world during the closing decades of eighteenth century. As a pioneer of western culture, education, science and technology as well as a respresentative of western political power, this country spent a considerable period of time in several Muslim lands, particularly in the Indian sub-continent and Egypt. Leaving aside such issues as the moral right and legitimacy of its imperialistic presence in those regions, it was expected of it, even from purely intellectual and psychological view-points, to have taken a sincere interest in trying to understand the spirit of the most

effective and energetic religion of its colonies, if only because that religion had acted as the greatest source and springhead of revolutionary change during the past centuries over a large portion of the world. It had left a deep and durable mark on human civilization. It can, of course, be said that it was Islam which had saved humanity and its nobler values from destruction and given them a new lease of life. It had given rise to a new force – a new Ummat—which drew its strength from truth and virtue and fought against the forces of darkness and ignorance since it considered this to be the very end and goal of its existence. It had changed the course of history not by marking a total break from the past like certain militant and despotic powers before it, but by showing a new way of life to the world. It was because of its labours that human civilization was not only enabled to proceed ahead on the road to progress but the task was also made easier by it. Its call in the seventh century A.D. propagated monotheism with such vigour and determination as was never witnessed before, restored human dignity, fostered equality and universal brotherhood through practical examples, gave rights to women, created a deep and living relationship between man and his Creator by inculcating love and sincere devotion to Him in a way unparalleled in the history of religions. Social service with a view to win the good pleasure of God was raised to the level of divine worship by it. This religion also created an eagerness among the masses for the cultivation of knowledge and produced not a few encylopedic writers whose creations are still regarded as the most valuable treasures of learning. All these achievements of it are undeniable facts supported by reliable historical evidence.

Institutions for the study of Islam, the Quran and the life of the Prophet with adequate financial and other resources should have been set up, as a natural consequence, in every part of Britain. Encouragement should have been given to an objective study of Islam, free from all prejudices arising out of the Crusades, religious bigotry, and political aims and ambitions which very often do not allow one to look dispassionately at the intellectual legacy, faith and culture of subjugated peoples. I do not mean to under-rate either the importance or utility of the departments of Islamic Studies and West Asian Culture in the British Universities, but what I seek to emphasise is that a deeper study with greater sincerity, breadth of vision and largeheartedness was required than mere schooling for the attainment of certain economic and material benifits.

Unfortunately, however, there has been only a one-way traffic between Britain and its colonies, or rather between the East and the West, during the last hundred years or more. The western countries have used education in the East largely as an instrument for producing men who could think and act like them, and serve their imperialistic needs and purposes; they never felt the need of taking or learning anything from the East. Undoubtedly, this attitude can partly be attributed to the political weakness of the East, and resultant feelings of frustration and inferiority complex. The East had also lost even a semblance of the courage of conviction which had inspired a poor man blessed with prophethood in a far-off Arabian town called Yathrib, now Medina, to send envoys to the Emperors of the most powerful kingdoms of the day ruling over almost the entire civilized world of his time. He wrote to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius

(A.D. 610-641) and the Iranian monarch Chosroes II (A.D. 590-628), inviting them to the faith of monotheism. In his letter to Heraclius, he cited the following verse of the Quran :

> O people of the Scripture ; Come to an agreement between us and you : that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And, if they turn away, then say : Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).[1]

It is possible that the day he dictated these letters, he might have gone without a meal or had no oil to light the earthen lamp in his house for this was the way he normally lived throughout his life while the slaves of those to whom he addressed them might have been taken sick on that very day because of overindulgence

When the followers of this man met the warlords and other dignitaries of these empires and were asked the reason for the visit. they replied : "We have been sent by God to take out His bondmen from the overlordship of fellowmen to His own overlordship, from the narrow confines of this world to its boundlessness and from the oppressiveness of other religions to the fairness and justice of Islam."[2]

Frankly, I am not surprised at the reply they gave for they had really gone forth to emancipate mankind from the bondage of fellow beings in order to make them true servants of God and considered themselves to be the harbingers of human freedom and preachers and upholders of true mono-

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1. Q, III : 64
2. Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidayah wan Nihayah* (Beirut, 1966), Vol. I., p. 39.

theism. But I do marvel at the other part of the reply given by those half-clad and ill-fed dwellers of the desert. They were claiming to lead the rulers of vast and populous countries from the narrowness of earthly life to the limitlessness of God's universe. Their reply shows that they were convinced of the fact that all those who were merely after material benefits and thoughtless appeasement of the senses were, in fact, the prisoners of their own desires and man-made conventions, and no better than serfs and slaves. Such persons could be compared to birds with beautiful plumage and a sweet voice that were shut in a golden cage.

Had the youngmen of the erstwhile British colonies and protectorates coming to the universities of this country for higher education possessed self-confidence and a firm conviction in God, they would have been able to convince at least their friends and class-mates, if not their teachers, of the need to undertake a study of Islam in depth instead of getting overawed themselves by the glitter of European civilization.

I would be guilty of injustice, if I did not mention here some of the Muslim youngmen who received western education which had been introduced also in India and who used English as the medium of expressing their thoughts. A few of them earned the recognition of English-speaking people and some were even praised by the scholars of this country for their contribution to literature and providing food for thought to others. One of these was Rt. Hon. Syed Ameer Ali about whose *Spirit of Islam* a noted orientalist. Mr. Osborn said that the book was certainly commendable for its author had a masterly command over the English language. Mr. Osborn further remarked that there were few Englishmen

who could emulate his inimitable style which was free from the defects common in the writings of Indian writers in English language. He congratulated Indian Muslims for having such a writer among them.[1]

Another luminary was Dr. Sir Mohammad Iqbal (Cantab) whose depth of thought and poetic genius have been recognised by the top-most intellectuals of the West. Prof. Nicholson of London University rendered Dr. Iqbal's *Asrar-i-Khudi* (Secrets of the self) and *Rumuz-i-Bekhudi* (Mysteries of selflessness) into English. In the centenary celebrations held to commemorate the memory of Dr. Iqbal at Lahore in December, 1977, under the auspices of the Government of Pakistan, it was revealed that the number of books and journals published by that time in different languages about Dr. Iqbal numbered about two thousand and quite a number of these were in English language.

I cannot help looking back to another great fighter for Indian freedom who really brought the freedom movement into active public life. A zealous Muslim as well as a noted writer and speaker, he was a graduate of Oxford University and used to write Oxon with his name. This was Maulana Mohammad Ali of the Khilafat movement's fame. But these are just a few individuals from among the thousands of promising youngmen who came to England for higher education from its dominions. They returned to their countries armed with academic degrees from British universitises. But as I have said earlier, it was only a one-way-traffic from here which was hardly of any benefit to the East or the West so far as Islam was concerned. It never received

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1. Cited from Dr. Ahmad Amin, *Zu'ama ul-Islam fi Asr-il-Hadith*

the attention it deserved. England attracted thousands of Muslim youngmen from its vast empire spread all over Asia while France used to have a large number of students from its dependencies in North Africa but no serious attention was ever paid to Islam because these youngmen lacked the self-assurance, religious fervour and missionary zeal which had been the distinguishing feature of the seventh century illiterate or semi-literate Arabs. This was despite the fact that the difference in the cultural levels of seventh century Arabia and its Byzantine and Iranian neighbours was much greater than that obtaining between the West and India, Egypt or North African countries. Muslim students coming to the West from these countries used to acquaint themselves with the western culture and civilization in their own lands and, at any rate, none of these countries was as backward as the seventh century Arabia.

Both the parties were equally responsible for this lamentable state of affairs although it is always imperative for every vigorous, developing and pragmatic society to devote itself to such intellectual endeavours. When physical sciences and technology took the command of human thought and knowledge in the middle of the nineteenth century, they had a golden opportunity to utilize religion (of which Islam was a living and forceful representative) for pressing the fruits or knowledge and power into right channels for the betterment of humanity. It was the time to inculcate self-restraint, to raise the people above the barriers of countries and nations, to propagate human dignity and equality of all the peoples and to discourage the highly dangerous and senseless rivalry in the acquisition and display of strength among the different nations of the world which have, by now, been

pushed to the edge of the precipice. Had it been done the world leadership would have been willing to-day to lend its ears to the divine call.

> And for that Abode of the hereafter, we assign it unto those who seek not exaltation in the earth, nor yet corruption. The sequel is for those who are God-fearing.

The world to-day would have been altogether different if the progress in science and technology had been accompanied by the fear of God and respect for human values. Then its powerful and unlimited resources would have been guided by loftier aims and ideals, and it would have promoted cooperative endeavour between different nations instead of generating the spirit of contest, collision and conflict. Then we would have found ourselves living as members of a civilised and enlightened family instead of being divided into the present power blocks of East and West whose rivalry is threatening the very existence of human civilizatian or rather the human race itself. But the development of ephemeral knowledge, science and technology yoked to unbridled politics and physical gratification has brought humanity on the verge of self-destruction. Iqbal had correctly predicted that :—

The insolent thought that
had laid bare the nature's secrets,
Has put its own hearth in danger
by its lambent flame.

Ladies and Gentlemen; we cannot deny that modern civilization and contemporary intellectual leadership have failed in the sphare of character-building and giving to the world

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1 . Q, XXVIII : 83.

conscientious individuals, guided by a living sense of social responsibility. It can 'enchain the sunbeams,' 'seek the orbits of the atars', send 'men to the planets', and put the atomic energy to a great purpose. It can remove poverty and make everyone literate. No one can deny its achievements. But its helplessness is self-evident where the raising up of good and virtuous individuals, of men of faith and moral rectitude is concerned, That is why the work of centuries is being wasted and an overpowering feeling of frustration and non-fulfilment is creeping over the world What is more, man is losing faith even in science and learning which can set off a powerful reaction against knowledge and civilization and mark the beginning of a revolt against the traditional values and accepted norms of society. Misguided men have perverted even the sound and harmless means and implements and turned them into tools of corruption and destruction. A strong boat cannot be made with rotten boards. It is a fallacy to believe that the boards may be weak and decayed, piece by piece, but when they are put together, they become good and strong. Thieves may be thieves individually, but if they form a group, they get transformed into watchmen and begin to act as responsible citizens. The individuals whom modern intellectual leadership is producing are devoid of faith and earnestness. They are ignorant of the true station and dignity of mankind. It is only the logic of strength and the doctrine of pleasure that they understand. Or they swear by nationalism. Whether such men are the leaders of a capitalist or socialist system, they cannot set up a healthy and God-fearing society, nor an environment of peace and well-being. They can never be trusted with the destiny of mankind.

We are passing through a critical time when the fate of not one country but of the entire humanity is at stake ; it is facing the danger of total destruction. Efforts of a few moderate and discreet reformers and educationists, howsoever well-meaning, will be of no avail. I do not mean to deny their utility in normal conditions, but at a time so crucial as to-day, when humanity is standing at the crossroad of life and death, largehearted men possessing moral courage, boldness of spirit and the zeal of martyrs are needed for these are the type of men who have saved humanity from death and destruction at such times.

Friends ; excuse me, if I say that the West which had produced in the past such giants in the field of social and physical sciences as well as in politics, who changed the map of the world, whose brilliance was acknowledged and whose discoveries were utilized with advantage by all, is now passing through a phase of intellectual stagnation. The West now needs a new and revolutionary leadership possessing prophetic courage in order to alter redically the end and purpose of science and technology from destruction to re-construction, to infuse a sense of equanimity and self-control and to bring about a re-adjustment between the rival political camps for saving human society from impending decay and death. West has been lacking in such a leadership for a long time. Iqbal had foreseen this danger about three quarters of a century ago and drawn attention to it in these lines, in which he describes the western civilization as :

Without a Kaleem[1] whose splendour is
Without a Khalil[2] whose fire;

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1. The Title of Moses   2. The Title of Abraham

Reckless intellect is the enemy of love's fortune.
Its atmosphere is devoid of heat of
impatient sigh;
And its patrons, without the stumble of an
intoxicated soul.

What Iqbal wants to convey in these couplets is that the West abounds in the signs of God as well as the sensibleness to acquire God's cognition through them, but the tragedy is that man who can summon the people to God like Moses and show them the path of virtue and goodness with the help of revelatory guidance is non-existant. Iqbal says that in this welter of materialism many are to be seen with the arrogant claim : 'I give life and cause death'[1], but no Abraham to disclaim them and proclaim : 'My Lord is He who gives life and causes death',[2] and face the consequences with courage and determination. The West's atmosphere seems to be charged with the hectic bustle of machines and economic endeavour but really it is frigid because there is no warmth of feeling and fervidness of heart. Its intellect annihilates love and worthiness of soul. It is so mindful of loss and gain that even the risks taken are always well-calculated and pre-meditated. Daring and instantaneous impulses have led the sages and savants of the old to take revolutionary steps for arousing the slumbering humanity. Such impulsive decisions make even the intellectuals to revise their thought and stand, for it is only through such decisions that the world takes a revolutionary turn.

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1. Q. 2 : 258. This was the claim made by Namrud, the King of Ur in the time of Abraham.
2. Q. 2 : 258.

A revolutionary leadership is now required to save human civilization, especially in the West (of which Britain forms a part and also has a glorious history). Such leadership needs to be realistic, noble-minded, courageous and self-denying for being successful in instilling a new life into the dying frame of modern civilization and even humanity. The educational and intellectual centres, literatures and writers of this country can play a leading role in this noble endeavour and I hope that the proposed Islamic Centre which is being set up by you here at the most appropriate time, will prove to be the first step in that direction. This is the hope and desire that has brought me here despite ill-health and heavy engagements.

I, once again, thank you all for the honour, and pray to the Almighty that your endeavours may succeed and prosper and fulfil the expectations of the Centre's well-wishers.

ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI